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Critical notice of Ernest Sosa's judgement and agency

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For *The Journal of Philosophy*

Review of Ernest Sosa, *Judgment and Agency*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015, pp. 269 + vi).

Ernest Sosa's latest monograph, *Judgment and Agency*, is an incredibly important work of contemporary epistemology. Part of its importance resides in the fact that it develops the general virtue-theoretic approach to epistemology that Sosa has spearheaded over several decades, and which is the most sophisticated version of its kind. But this book is not merely an incremental extension of Sosa's previous work in this field, since it substantially modifies, and in the process enhances, the view. Sosa offers us a detailed metaphysical account of judgement as an exercise of cognitive agency, and engages with a range of further issues that are crucial to our appreciation of his distinctive brand of virtue epistemology, such as the historical antecedents of his proposal.

There is so much to admire in this book, and yet a decent review demands some critique. Since space is short, I will cut to the chase and focus on one element of Sosa's view that I think is problematic (even though I must admit to being nonetheless somewhat attracted to his alternative picture). This concerns the account of epistemic risk that he outlines, and the role of his virtue epistemology with regard to the elimination of such risk.

First, I want to signal the angle from which I am approaching this problem. I maintain that the reason why we hold that knowledge is incompatible with veritic luck (i.e., whereby it is a matter of luck that one's belief is true, given how one formed it), is because of our concern to eliminate high levels of epistemic risk. Very roughly, I claim that assessments of (bad) epistemic luck and epistemic risk are simply two different perspectives that one can take on the same epistemic event. In the former case, one is evaluating the target epistemic event in question in a backwards-looking fashion, one where the cognitive success has occurred. In the latter case, one is evaluating the target epistemic event in a forwards-looking fashion, where one considers the high risk that the cognitive success might have been a cognitive failure instead. Nonetheless, although we can adopt these two perspectives on the same epistemic event, our concern to eliminate veritic luck is because of our concern to avoid high levels of epistemic risk (i.e., rather than *vice versa*).¹

I think this point is important because Sosa adopts a rather sanguine approach to the possibility that one's knowledge can be both *bona fide* and also subject to epistemic luck. He argues, for example (pp. 117-123), that one can know that one's lottery ticket is a loser simply

by reflecting on the odds involved, even though such a belief, so formed, could clearly have easily been wrong. Similarly, his response to the Gettier-style barn-façade case is to attribute knowledge, even though the belief, so formed, could have easily been wrong (e.g., p. 79). My point, however, is that such a permissive approach to veritic epistemic luck carries over into a correspondingly permissive approach to epistemic risk. After all, taking a forwards-looking perspective, given how these beliefs were formed they could have easily resulted in a false belief.

Sosa sometimes accounts for how certain kinds of epistemic risk are compatible with knowledge by appealing to different levels of epistemic appraisal, such that while knowledge at one level is present, knowledge at another level is absent. So, for example, while the subject has knowledge in the barn façade case, she does not exhibit the more refined epistemic standing of *knowing full well*. This is an intriguing suggestion, and admittedly does go some way towards diagnosing why the standard line on these cases is not to attribute knowledge. But I don't think that it is enough once we put the point in terms of epistemic risk. How could *bona fide* propositional knowledge, of any grade, be compatible with high levels of epistemic risk?

In some places, Sosa takes the line that what level of reliability or exclusion of risk (he tends to run both together) is required for knowledge can vary from situation to situation (e.g., pp. 126-28). Accordingly, he could argue that although there is epistemic risk in these cases, it is sufficiently low to clear the relevant threshold for this epistemic performance.

But I do not find this proposal at all plausible. After all, notice that the level of epistemic risk is extremely high, in that it is characteristic of these cases that the risk event in question—i.e., that one ends up forming a false belief by employing that same belief-forming process—is modally very close. Put another way, while we might grant that the degree of epistemic risk that is compatible with knowledge might vary from case to case, it is a stretch to say that knowledge can in any situation be compatible with a very high degree of epistemic risk.

For example, imagine that one discovered that the plane on which one was flying was such that, unlike all other commercial planes, it would immediately fall from the sky if struck by lightning. Suppose further that one knows enough about meteorology to know that while being hit by lightning is a low-probability event, it is nonetheless something that could easily happen. The conditions for a lightning strike, let us say, are such that when in flight one is always in a situation whereby one could easily occur. Wouldn't we think that such a flight was high risk? No doubt there will be contexts where we will be willing to take this risk—such as when one's life depends on catching the flight—but that wouldn't undermine the high degree of risk in play. The crux of the matter is that if a certain risk event—in this case one's plane

falling out of the sky—is modally very close, then we tend to judge that we are subject to unduly high levels of risk, regardless of the other details of one’s situation.

Applied to the epistemic case, this suggests that we should be very wary of allowing knowledge to be compatible with the high level of epistemic risk in play in lottery-style and barn façade-style cases. Moreover, I think that we can diagnose Sosa’s failure to see this in terms of how he doesn’t appreciate how epistemic luck and epistemic risk are related. That is, I grant that saying that there can be genuine knowledge that is nonetheless subject to veritic epistemic luck is not obviously false. The trouble arises once one recognises that the reason why we care about eliminating veritic epistemic luck is because we care about eliminating high levels of epistemic risk. For now it follows on Sosa’s view that there can be genuine knowledge that is nonetheless subject to high levels of epistemic risk. That, I submit, does seem obviously false.

This one aspect of Sosa’s position notwithstanding, the fact remains that this book stands head-and-shoulders above much of contemporary work in epistemology, and represents—in common with much of Sosa’s published work—a high-water mark as regards scholarship in this area. Anyone serious about epistemology ought to read this book.

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REFERENCES

Pritchard, D. H. (*Forthcoming*). ‘Epistemic Risk’, *Journal of Philosophy*.

NOTES

¹ I develop this account of epistemic risk, and how it relates to debates about epistemic luck, in Pritchard (*forthcoming*).